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PEAK AND OTHER EXCEPTIONAL EXPERIENCES DURING THE GATEWAY

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Background

A revolution is occurring in consciousness expansion, the development of altered states, and psychospiritual growth (Walsh & Vaughan, 1993). At the forefront of this movement is an array of "neurotechnologies." These neurotechnologies are one of the newest hopes of promoting psychological growth. Many claims have been made regarding the efficacy of neurotechnological approaches to enhancing human performance and promoting exceptional positive well-being (Hutchison, 1994). Their potential to induce peak or similar kinds of experience is also suggested by some researchers (Isaacs, 1993; Wilson, 1991).

Despite such claims, a computer-assisted search of the literature has revealed a dearth of empirical research on the nature and patterns of peak-experiences associated with the use of these modalities. One program in which audioguidance is used is the *GATEWAY VOYAGE*® conducted at The Monroe Institute® (TMI). Anecdotal reports suggest that peak or similar experiences are a common occurrence during this program, and participants' lives are often dramatically changed by these events. The unusual frequency and consistency with which such events reportedly occur constitute a phenomenon worthy of investigation. However, to date there have been no systematic attempts to confirm these claims by empirical means.

Introduction to the Study

A dissertation study was conducted to: (1) examine the qualitative nature of reported peak and peak-like experiences during the *GATEWAY* program as recounted by participants; and (2) to study selected characteristics that may differentiate participants who have these experiences from those who do not.

Description of Participants

Participants consisted of volunteers from TMI's *Gateway Voyage*. Out of eleven groups, 160 people (81 males, 79 females) participated. They ranged in age from 24 to 72, with a median age of 46.5.

Measurement Instruments

A two-part Peak-Experience Questionnaire (PEQ) was developed for this study. Part I was used to collect retrospective self-reports of participants' recent peak and other personally

significant experiences. Part II was designed to explore the impact of these experiences on participants' lives, as well as the cognitive processes involved in integrating them.

The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) was used to assess the personality types of participants in the program.

The Herrmann Brain Dominance Instrument (HBDI), a self-report, paper-and-pencil inventory, was used to assess participants' thinking or cognitive styles. The inventory is based on a metaphorical model of the brain that is quadripartite: left and right cerebral, and left and right limbic. The HBDI indicates one's degree of preference for each of the four thinking styles associated with these four "areas" of the brain.

Procedures

* *Pre-Gateway*

The HBDI and MBTI were administered to volunteers by *Gateway* Trainers on the first day of each program. Demographic data were also collected to further define the research population.

* *Post-Gateway*

Part I of the PEQ was mailed to participants one week after *Gateway*. Part II of the PEQ was mailed six months after *Gateway*. Accompanying the PEQ was a transcript of each participant's most significant experience(s) to aid in accurate recall. Reminder notices were sent one week after the initial mailings. If there was no response after three weeks, the mailings were repeated.

Preliminary Results

Out of 160 participants, 125 completed the study. Incomplete but useful data were collected from 35 participants who dropped out.

The MBTI was completed by 157 participants. The most frequently occurring type (40 participants) was "INFP" (Introverted Intuitive Feeling Perceiving).

The HBDI was completed by 156 participants. The most frequently occurring type (47 participants) was "2211". Primary characteristics of this type are the ability to be creative, holistic, and synthesizing in the right cerebral quadrant, and interpersonal, emotional, and spiritual in the right limbic quadrant. Secondary characteristics include logical, analytical, and mathematical thinking associated with the left cerebral quadrant, and organizational, planning, and structure with the left limbic quadrant. In common parlance, these people are more "right brained" than "left brained".

One hundred twenty-one participants who reported peak and other powerful or significant experiences on the PEQ (for a total of 291). Of these 121 participants, 23 were single experiencers (i.e., reported only one experience) and 98 were multiple experiencers (two or more). Twenty participants did not report any experiences. Nineteen participants did not return the PEQ. Only two negative or "nadir" experiences were reported. The fact that only two nadir experiences were reported—out of a large pool of positive experiences—suggests that the *Gateway* program is overwhelmingly perceived as positive and growth-producing.

In addition to peak-experiences, a large variety of other "exceptional human experiences" were reported for which a provisional classification was developed. In Table 1, experiences were grouped by phenomenological content under four major categories: Intensified Sensory and Perceptual Experiences (Body), Cognitive Experiences (Mind), Psychodynamic Experiences (Emotions), and Transpersonal Experiences (Spirit). A fifth category, Miscellaneous Experiences, was added to accommodate those which did not logically fit any of the other four categories. More experiences were reported under the category of "Transpersonal Experiences" than for all other major categories combined. The sub-category containing the greatest number of reported experiences is "Other Experiences of Consciousness Outside the Usual Experiential Realms of Time and Space". However, it is closely followed by "Peak and Peak-Like Experiences" and "Inner Guidance or Channeling Experiences" in descending order of frequency.

Data were also collected on the conditions under which experiences began. Insight was sought into what may possibly trigger or facilitate such events. Participants' peak and most powerful or significant experiences occurred most frequently (72% of the time) while listening to Hemi-Sync® tapes. This finding suggests that the majority of personally meaningful experiences had during the *Gateway* program are directly associated with the use of the Hemi-Sync technology.

A variety of consistent aftereffects were reported: a greater commitment to one's psychospiritual growth; a sense of being more self-determined and responsible for one's life; a greater self-acceptance; living more fully in the present; a greater love for humanity; an increased willingness to take risks; an increased desire to help others; feeling more inner-directed (less willing to please others at the expense of self); an increased spontaneity; introspective (more willing to use inner guidance in decision-making). The overall effects pointed in the direction of increased self-actualization.

In addition, for many the effects also implied a newly-acquired sense of self-transcendence or realization that one is, indeed, more than one's physical body. This new, expanded sense of self included belief in the existence of other levels of reality; feeling inherently connected to something larger than self; belief in some form of benevolent "higher power"; and the loss of fear of death (knowing there is life after death).

The data suggest that some kind of active cognitive engagement is necessary to integrate one's experiences. Some methods of engagement were preferred. Discussing the experience with others was the method most frequently cited. Many participants mentioned confining discussion to trustworthy, significant others, or to those who had undergone similar experiences. The next most frequently method was to read about similar experiences. This was followed—in order of frequency—by keeping the experience to oneself (many found the occurrence too sacred to share), and writing about it. These four processes were the predominant modes of synthesis. Other approaches included: pondering the experience; painting or drawing the experience; expressing it musically; reliving or replaying the experience in one's mind; meditating on the experience; trying to recreate it; listening for inner guidance.

Summary and Conclusion

Based on data collected from eleven groups, it appears that peak-experiences occur with regularity during the *Gateway* Program, as well as a wide range and multidimensionality of other trans-ordinary experiences. This great variety and depth of experiences suggest that *Gateway* helps to facilitate a huge opening or expansion of consciousness. This expansion seems to occur in both the outer and inner dimensions of being. Interestingly, the types, intensity, and richness of patterns of experience reported bear a striking resemblance to those reported by psychedelic (LSD) researchers (Grof, 1976; Masters & Houston, 1966; Pahnke & Richards, 1972). A useful metaphor to conceptualize the types of experience reported is that of turning up the volume on life. One becomes more physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually awake.

To the extent individuals are willing to acknowledge and consciously integrate such profound experiences, their lives may radically change in positive, growthful directions.

TABLE 1

Major Categories and Frequencies of Reported Experiences

1. Intensified Sensory and Perceptual Experiences (Body)
    A. Deautomatization Experiences (11)
    B. Somatic Awareness (18)
2. Cognitive Experiences (Mind)
    A. Enhanced Mental Abilities (17)
3. Psychodynamic Experiences (Emotions)
    A. Regression to Early Childhood (and other life periods) (2)
    B. Resolution of Emotional Conflicts and Personality Integration (16)
4. Transpersonal Experiences (Spirit)
    A. Extreme Psychological Well-Being Experiences (23)
    B. Peak and Peak-Like Experiences (43)

C. Psychical Experiences (21)
D. Inner Guidance or "Channeling" Experiences (42)
E. Imagery of the Personal and Transpersonal Unconscious (19)
F. Encounter Experiences (25)
G. Other Experiences of Consciousness Outside the Usual Experiential Realms of Time and Space (46)

5. Miscellaneous Experiences
   A. Infrequent and Idiosyncratic Experiences (5)
   B. Uncodable Experiences (3)

Note: Frequencies for types of experience are in parentheses after sub-category names.

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I. "Exceptional human experience" was coined by Rhea White, a noted parapsychologist, as an umbrella term for many types of experience generally regarded as psychic or mystical. It is a useful construct for considering the varieties of experience as points on a continuum and for examining possible connections between some, if not all of them. It may provide the "big picture" that might be overlooked if we were to study these experiences as discrete types of experience only.

II. A more detailed classification of the reported experiences, including definitions and a list of specific types of experience under the categories listed in Table 1, is available from the author upon request.

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